DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 677 CE 029 186

AUTHOR Collins, Michael
TITLE Doing Philosophical Research in Adult Education.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Research; *Philosophy; *Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Conceptual Analysis; Phenomenology; *Philosophical Research

ABSTRACT

More deliberate efforts have been witnessed recently that incorporate philosophical criticism and analysis in the exploration and clarification of current concerns in adult education. Such studies might be regarded as pioneering attempts at doing philosophical research in adult education. Philosophical research has a prominent role to play in redressing the impoverishment that preoccupation with narrowly conceived operational definitions has brought to the field. Methods of philosophical inquiry can alert adult educators to crucial limitations in statistical studies, raise questions about unconditional acceptance of operational definitions, and help examine the relevance of various research methods for adult education. Two prominent approaches to doing philosophy--linguistic/conceptual analysis and phenomenology--are rigorous research activities with implications for adult education research. There is a vital task for linguistic analysis in examining and assessing the feasibility of leading concepts and norms. The outstanding theme of phenomenological research, intentionality, opens the way for more penetrating philosophical investigations of self-directed learning. Other adult education issues which lend themselves to the descriptive research of these two philosophical approaches are ethical problems, such as mandatory continuing education and development of theory. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

DOING PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH IN ADULT EDUCATION

Michael Collins
Assistant Professor
Adult & Occupational Education
Kansas State University

© 1981

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael Collins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED205677

One of the major drawbacks in addressing a topic of this nature is that we can so easily become entangled in philosophical commitments from the outset. In starting to build a case for doing philosophical research, and in highlighting a few ways of going about the task, we are well advised to bear in mind that there are many ways of dealing with a problem, all of which may be fundamentally philosophical. Our presentation is unavoidably somewhat discursive. While it is an invitation for us to reflect critically on our familiar modes of action in adult education - including our research endeavors - any real significance will probably have to emerge in dialogic contexts far less formal than that of a discourse on research.

A schematic delineating the various divisions, of the perennial problems - (schools of thought) - of the philosophical enterprise in itself constitutes an instructive framework when considering the role of philosophizing in adult education. It encompasses:

HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY (the ideas and insights of the great philosophers).

BRANCHES OF PHILOSOPHY (its over-riding concerns--epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics).

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER AREAS OF INQUIRY (Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of History, Philosophy of Education).

BASIC PHILOSOPHIC SCHOOLS OR POSITIONS (Realism, Idealism, Pragmatism, Existentialism).

CE 029 186

Overview texts in philosophy tend to be organized with the enduring philosophical problems (epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and so on) as constituting the major divisions, or according to the major schools of philosophy. Insufficient as these classifications are bound to be, they do present us with

a useful referential format. Gerry Apps has set out for us a framework along these lines in Towards a Working Philosophy of Adult Education(1).

As for doing philosophy in adult education, much of what we have presents us with the personal philosophies based on personal statements of belief, or credos, of notable people in the field. In this regard, we can point to Eduard Lindeman's thematic work The Meaning of Adult Education(9), and Paul Bergevin's A Philosophy for Adult Education(5). Alfred North Whitehead observed that this manner of philosophising is something of a preoccupation among philosophers of education in North America and, assuredly, it is important for us to have some sense of the standpoints of notable contributors to our field. Sharan Merriam's Philosophical Perspectives in Adult Education: A Critical Review of the Literature(11), which appeared in the Journal of Adult Education is a noteworthy summary of the philosophical commitments of leading adult educators. In a field so very much concerned with values and valuing, a focus on the constitution and appropriateness of guiding statements of belief continue to be of consequence.

Recently, however, we have witnessed more deliberate efforts to incorporate philosophical criticism and analysis in the exploration and clarification of current concerns in adult education. As examples, we can cite Robert Carlson's philosophical-historical treatment of the issue of Professionalization(7), and Jack Mezirow's study on Perspective Transformation(12), both of which appeared in Adult Education. Two British philosophers of adult education, K.H. Lawson(8) and R.W. Paterson(14), have adopted the standpoint of linguistic analysis in their treatment of concepts and values in the field. Studies such as theirs, and there are others, might be regarded as pioneering attempts at doing philosophical research in adult education rather than merely talking about philosophy.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to begin assuring ourselves that doing philosophy is a research endeavor and that we can, indeed, talk meaningfully of "doing philosophical research." According to the Oxford English Dictionary's

initial definition, research is "to search into (a matter or subject); to investigate or study closely." Emphasis is placed on its exploratory meaning as well as on the qualities of keenly observant examination and rigour. We are referred to its association with delving, probing, and unearthing in the overall thrust toward clarification. The prefix "re" conveys the sense of returning again, and repeatedly, to the endeavor. It suggests that the corresponding activity meets with resistance, and points to its association with breaking-down, unveiling, and with building again.

A working of the dictionary sharpens our awareness of how the expression is used, and could lead us to a thorough-going conceptual analysis or linguistic phenomenology. For our present purposes, however, it suffices to note that these constituents of the research activity also characterize the activity of philosophical inquiry.

At the 1980 Adult Education Research Conference Gary Matkin presented a paper entitled Theory, Method, and Appropriateness in Adult Education(10) which drew our attention to the serious shortcoming and trivial findings emanating from statistical studies. I do not propose that we debate Matkin's contention, nor do I think it is profitable for us to enter into the tiresome qualitative versus quantitative argument which has bedevilled the social sciences and various branches of educational research. However, it is relevant for us to note in this context the extent to which the urge to derive constructs (operational definitions) for the purpose of statistical manipulation has foreshortened the research endeavor, as we have just described it, in adult education. The term foreshortened is used with deliberation here. It implies 'distortion' as well as premature foreclosure. Excessive reductionism for the sake of manageable constructs is bought at the expense of meaning. This is not restored by the onset of a multivariate analysis which merely entails the statistical manipulation, simultaneously, of a number of excessively reduced operational definitions.

Philosophical research has a prominent role to play in redressing the impoverishment that pre-occupation with narrowly conceived operational definitions has brought to the field. Through philosophical inquiry -- whether it is from the perspective of linguistic analysis or phenomenological investigations -- we can derive a clearer and more meaningful understanding of those issues and concerns which distinguish adult education. The methods of philosophical inquiry, entailing critical analysis, or even the temporary suspension of taken-for-granted assumptions can alert us to crucial limitations in our statistical studies, apart from those which arise merely from difficulties in deploying the techniques of research design.

The most difficult and interesting questions about the themes of adult learning, motivation, and participation have yet to be addressed. Our understanding of them can be enriched through philosophical analysis and exploration. Philosopical investigations would steer us away from the pitfalls of reification, variously characterized as "misplaced concreteness" (by Whitehead), "vicious intellectualism" (James), and the "naturalistic fallacy" (G.E. Moore).
What are these things we have concretized? Self-concept? Competencies? Life-Stages? Philosophical approaches are needed to disturb our taken-for-granted acceptance of these operational definitions, and to raise questions about the validity of their embodiment within the adult education enterprise. This is not a trivial concern. Our concepts, and the regard in which they are held, guide our approach to program planning in its many phases, adult development and the learning process, and research. Philosophical research can help us to determine the extent to which our concepts enhance or impede these activities. The temporary suspension of taken-for-granted assumptions, combined with careful analysis, can undermine instances of "misplaced concreteness" which characterizes some of our regularly deployed concepts. This, in turn, will unearth fresh dimensions and neglected data for experiential (including empirical) investigation.

Philosophical inquiry has a role to play in further substantiating claims for methodological diversity such as those made by David Williams in a paper entitled What is Research in Adult Education presented at the 1977 AERC Meeting(15). The assumptions underlying these claims merit further analysis and clarification. Both analytic and descriptive approaches can be brought to bear in delineating the structures of supporting theories. At the same time, unexamined assumptions with regard to the empiricism and objectivity of statistical surveys and experimental designs might be brought into question. It is evident that we are accustomed to using the terms "empirical," "data-based," and "objective" to designate studies which feature statistics. We need to examine the extent to which the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for our research endeavors, as well as the claims that our experimental design studies are actually modelled after such methods. In the process of clarification, in drawing out the distinctions and connections, we can obtain a better sense of the relevance of various research methods, including statistical design, for adult education.

Two prominent approaches to doing philosophy are linguistic - or conceptual-analysis, and what has been technically termed phenomenology. The former is seen to stem largely from the philosophy of G.E. Moore and Wittgenstein, whereas modern phenomenology can be traced, in large measure, to the thematic works of Edmund Husserl who, in turn, was painstakingly generous in acknowledging the influence of his predecessors. Neither approaches can be adequately characterized in short order, so we shall not burden ourselves additionally with the major issues of contention which lie between them. Perhaps their most important shared characteristic is that they are both rigorous research activities in the sense described earlier in the paper.(17)

By and large, linguistic analysts adopt the standpoint that the proper role of philosophy is nothing more than the analysis of language use, or the analysis of concepts. The major thrust, then, is for conceptual clarification through

analysis of the way we use the language. This entails critical assessment of taken-for-granted assumptions and of the methods we are accustomed to using in various realms of activity. Bearing in mind what we said about 'misplaced concreteness,' there is a vital task for linguistic analysis in examining and assessing the feasibility of the leading concepts and norms of adult education.

In The Way of Phenomenology, Richard Zaner asserts that "the difficulties of introducing phenomenology are notorious, and quite sufficient to dissuade even the hardiest souls."(16:30) Still, the entire dialogue is a parlous undertaking so we will venture on--at risk. Like linguistic analysis, phenomenology is philosophy as criticism, and requires that we not merely question our taken-for-granted assumptions and pre-suppositions, but actually suspend them during our investigations through the phenomenological device of bracketing. This is a deliberate effort to set aside all ontological judgments on the nature and essence of things, events, values, etc. The reality of things and events is not denied but "put into brackets" while the object of our experience and our experiencing of it is explored. Clarification is to be achieved through careful description, but economy of thought or expression is not to be bought at the expense of the richness of the data. Many leading phenomenological concerns such as the constitution of the stock of knowledge and the life-world of the normal wide-awake adult have considerable consequence for adult education. The outstanding theme of phenomenological research, intentionality, opens the way for more penetrating philosophical investigations in the area of self-directed learning and related matters.

The foremost concern of the linguistic approach is analysis, but descriptive work is not slighted. In his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein admonishes us to look carefully at the language we use in our different spheres of activity in order to derive its meaning. From meticulous description "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing! Sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."(3:29) Phenomenology is often characterized as the descriptive science by researchers who adhere strictly to

Husserl's methods. His imperative to "go to the things themselves" and describe them is frequently cited to emphasize that the phenomenological approach is more genuinely empirical in its investigation of human experiences (which includes sensory perception) than the predominant mode of research in present day psychology and sociology. In this regard, it is apparent that phenomenology is akin to the pragmatism of James and Dewey.

The point is that description is not easy. If it is undertaken in a thorough-going manner, it becomes more difficult than explanation. Just try it on a familiar object of every-day experience, and then start to apply the method -- without recourse to explanatory statements -- to a major issue or concern in adult education.

Unfortunately, we have rebuffed descriptive research in adult education. It is viewed as a lower level activity, the mark of a discipline in its immature stages, which is to be abandoned in favor of doubtful empirical methods. This is puzzling because one is very hard put to find instances of careful descriptive research in the field. The enunciation of definitions of adult education and the dissemination of interesting anecdotal writings, important though they are, do not constitute descriptive research of a kind that is built up through philosophical methods.

This tendency to down-play the importance of descriptive research and conceptual analysis is apparent in the notion that the application of empirical methods (denoting statistical techniques) to a major issue in adult education is indicative of progress to a higher realm of endeavor. It might well be appropriate for us to measure the effectiveness of mandatory continuing education, for example, according to pre-determined (subjectively derived) operational definitions, but do not let us abandon the idea that this important theme continues to merit serious investigation of a non-statistical kind. Many committed adult educators will contend that a vital issue, such as mandatory continuing education, is most appropriately and sufficiently dealt with as an ethical problem. And, as such, it lends itself to analytical and phenomenological research. In the light of these

remarks, we hope that the impressive research project undertaken by Hal Beder, Gary Darkenwald, and Gae Broadwater - and entitled Andragogy v Pedagogy: Moving from Philosophical Debate to Empirical Analysis(4), will not be contrued as implying that we no longer need further or, indeed, initial philosophical investigations of issues connected with the theme. Rather than thinking in terms of a hierarchical structure of different approaches to research, we might be better informed if we looked earnestly for appropriate inter-connections between the methods. We are not enjoined to preclude one mode of research in the act of deploying another. Nor should we refrain from raising questions about assumptions that one methodology must enjoy special hierarchical privileges.

Both linguistic analysis and phenomenology have a part to play in the development of theory in adult education. (In an important sense doing philosophy is theorizing). Theory can be characterized in the form of comprehensive generalizations or as precisely stated propositions. According to Barton and Lazarsfeld, "the theories for which qualitative research is most often used are relatively large scale, wide-ranging systems, or relation"(2:240) which includes, of course, meticulous description. Phenomenologically-based theories, as delineations of the structures of conscious experience, belong to this class whereas linguistic analysis can be brought to bear with effect in theories represented by precise propositions. These theories do not depend for their validity on whether or not they can be readily appropriated for statistical studies. As Erik Erikson has stressed, "an obligation to work within the parameters of statistical design may seriously hamper the development of useful theory."(6:33) However, theories developed according to the methods of linguistic analysis or phenomenology can be couched in such a way that it is possible for them to be refuted by the emergence of new evidence. That is, they are amenable to testing. We are certainly in need of such theories in the field which can guide our professional endeavors and be tested in action.

The issues of evidence and validation constitute one of the foremost concerns of philosophy, and are found at the heart of the matter when we compare various philosophical commitments. In the present context, and all too briefly, we can note that different research methods and their validating procedures are carried out according to identifiable structures and rules which refer us to the particular standpoint which they each represent.

Despite its close alignment with logical positivism, linguistic analysis does not insist that, for validity, its clarifying statements must necessarily be supported by immediate sensory (empirical) experience. In uncovering the meaning of human experience, it refers us to acts of hoping, valuing and reminiscing. Among the remarkable efforts of recent linguistic analysis is its demonstration that the verification principle of the positivistic schools which denies the validity of countless questions concerning conscious experience in its quest against metaphysics, is in itself a metaphysical position. This again opens to questioning some of the assumptions upon which statistical research in adult education is supposedly based.

Phenomenological investigations are even more insistent that the evidence of sense experience is only partially adequate -- and necessarily contingent, at that. It is essential to set out evidence from intuitive experience if we are to determine what the things themselves (for instance, objects of experience, states of affairs, knowledge claims) are, and to describe them as they are. So with regard to the problem of evidence and validation, a remark by Ortega y Gasset is instructive here:

> One must keep the positivist imperative of immediate experience, while at the same time saving it from positivist narrowness.(13:125)

Even cursory engagement with the problem of validation furthers the case for methodological diversity in the field.

Philosophical inquiry confronts those questions to which, at present, there are no definite answers. Its potential for us lies in the posing, exploration, and clarification of problems relevant to our field, and in methodical criticism

of taken-for-granted assumptions which surround them. There is little to be gained from investigations which eschew the need for systematic doubting, pointing directly to the denouement of the problem at the outset. Even though vital problems remain unresolved, the investigative process and the evidence it unearths informs our practice as adult educators. We can engage with philosophical research--doing philosophy--and put ourselves into action as adult educators with a better sense of what our field is about.

REFERENCES

1. Apps, Jerold W. Toward a Working Philosophy of Adult Education. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Publications in Continuing Education and ERIC Clearing House on Adult Education, 1973.

2. Barton, Allen H., and Lazarsfeld, Paul F. "Qualitative Support of Theory," Issues in Participant Observation, George J. McCall and J.L. Simmons (Eds). Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969.

3. Beck, Robert N. Perspectives in Philosophy, New York, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961, p.29.

4. Beder, Harold, Darkenwald, Gordon, & Broadwater, Gae. "Andragogy versus Pedagogy: Moving from Philosophical Debate to Empirical Analysis." Proceedings of Lifelong Learning Research Conference. University of Maryland, February, 1981.

5. Bergevin, Paul. A Philosophy for Adult Education. New York, N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1967.

6. Bischof, Ledford J. Adult Psychology. New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1976, p.33.

7. Carlson, Robert A. "Professionalization of Adult Education: An Historical-Philosophical Analysis." Adult Education. Vol.28, No.1, 1977.

8. Lawson, K.H. Philosophical Concepts and Values in Adult Education. Milton Keynes. The Open University Press, 1979.

9. Lindeman, Eduard C. The Meaning of Adult Education. Montreal, Harvest House, 1961.

10. Matkin, Gary W. "Theory, Method, and Appropriateness in Adult Education Research. Vancouver: Proceedings of the Twenty First Adult Education Research Conference, 1980, pp.138-144.

11. Merriam, Sharon. "Philosophical Perspectives on Adult Education: A Critical Review of the Literature." Adult Education, Vol.27, No.4, 1977.

12. Mezirow, Jack. "Perspective Transformation." Adult Education, Vol.28, No.2, 1978.

13. Ortega y Gasset, Jose. What is Philosophy? New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1964.

14. Paterson, R.W.K. Values, Education and the Adult. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

15. Williams, David C. "What is 'Research' in Adult Education: Issues in Methodological Diversity." Minneapolis: Unpublished paper delivered at Adult Education Research Conference, 1977.

16. Zaner, Richard M. The Way of Phenomenology: Criticism as a Philosophical Discipline. New York, N.Y.: Pegasus, 1970.

17. Although there are important distinctions to be made, phenomenology is closely linked to the philosophy of existentialism.